

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

271031Z May 05

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 05 TEL AVIV 003222

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA, NEA/IPA, NEA/PPD

WHITE HOUSE FOR PRESS OFFICE, SIT ROOM
NSC FOR NEA STAFF

JERUSALEM ALSO FOR ICD
LONDON ALSO FOR HKANONA AND POL
PARIS ALSO FOR POL
ROME FOR MFO
E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [IS](#) [KMDR](#) [MEDIA](#) [REACTION](#) [REPORT](#)
SUBJECT: ISRAEL MEDIA REACTION

SUBJECTS COVERED IN THIS REPORT:

Mideast

Key stories in the media:

All media reported on, and major outlets led with, the visit of PA Chairman [President] Mahmoud Abbas to the White House Thursday. Leading media quoted Bush as saying that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice will visit Israel and the PA before the disengagement move.

The media underscored President Bush's positive attitude toward Abbas and noted that Bush's remarks at the meeting seemingly contradict the reported contents of his April 2004 letter to PM Sharon regarding settlement blocs. Each media outlet highlighted a different aspect of Abbas's talks with Bush. The leading story in Ha'aretz begins with Bush's demand that Israel halt all settlement construction. Referring to Abbas's reported statement at a meeting with Congressional leaders that the Palestinians "will be throwing roses as the Israelis withdraw," Maariv banners, "Abu Mazen Promises a Rose Withdrawal," and cited concerns among the IDF that Bush accepts Abbas's position despite the fact that the Palestinian leader has only made promises. Yediot emphasizes the U.S. demand that Israel refrain from destroying the settlers' houses in the Katif Bloc (Gush Katif). Jerusalem Post banners: "Bush Pledges USD 50 Million in Direct Aid to PA; Praises Abbas's Courage at 'Start of Difficult Journey.'" Hatzofe's headline: "Bush Slapped Sharon in the Face." Channel 10-TV's Arab affairs correspondent commented on Thursday: "Bush appeared more Palestinian than a Palestinian." Palestinian FM Nasser Al-Kidwa was quoted as saying in an interview with Ha'aretz's Akiva Eldar, which was conducted before the senior PA delegation's trip to Washington, that the U.S. should take a more prominent, activist role in the Middle East.

Jerusalem Post reported that at a meeting Thursday with U.S. Jewish officials just before his White House visit, Abbas said Sharon has rejected efforts to open back-channel communications about final-status issues.

Maariv quoted Defense Ministry sources as saying that the GOI is considering releasing Palestinian prisoners "with blood on their hands."

Yediot reported that, following U.S. pressure, Israel has committed itself to handing over to the PA all of the information it possesses on infrastructure in the Gaza Strip. All media quoted Disengagement Administration Director Yonatan Bassi as saying Thursday that the GOI's decision to spend dozens of millions of dollars for temporary housing for evacuated settlers was a mistake. Bassi cited settler pressure on Sharon. Nevertheless, the Knesset's Finance Committee allocated 150 to 220 million shekels (around USD 34 million to 50 million) to the project, depending on the media. Israel Radio reported that on Thursday, the state submitted documents to the High Court of Justice, hinting that it would freeze the plan it has presented for permanent housing for evacuees if the settler families do not enroll in it within two months.

Jerusalem Post reported that Hamas leaders in the West Bank and Gaza have told the newspaper that Hamas will not attack Israeli forces evacuating the Gaza Strip

later this summer, instead maintaining a "state of calm."

Ha'aretz writes that the official results of the Egyptian referendum on constitutional change constitute a victory for President Mubarak's party.

All media reported that the Association of University Teachers, Britain's largest union of university educators, voted on Thursday to end its boycott of Bar-Ilan and Haifa Universities. The decision passed with a two-thirds majority.

All media reported that acceding to President Moshe Katsav's request, 40 anti-disengagement students from across Israel ended their 12-day hunger strike on Thursday,

Ha'aretz reported that Egypt is demanding that the New York conference of members of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty issue a summary statement urging treaty members to take operative steps to compel Israel to permit international supervision of its nuclear program. However, the newspaper quoted sources involved with the conference as saying that Egypt vehemently opposes any mention of Iran's nuclear program in the summary document, and that Egypt is insisting that the document focus solely on Israel's nuclear program, in order to isolate Israel diplomatically and bar it from scientific ties with other countries in the field of nuclear research. The sources were also quoted as saying that the U.S. and the EU oppose Egypt's demand to paint Israel as the world's nuclear "bad boy."

Ha'aretz and Jerusalem Post reported that Israel has prevented the deputy chairman of the Islamic Movement's northern branch, Sheikh Kamal Khatib, from taking part in a conference on the right of return, which is scheduled to take place in London this weekend.

Leading media reported that on Thursday, Israeli F-15 planes escorted a British Airways airliner flying from London to Tel Aviv, because of a failure in the airplane's communications. The Israeli authorities feared that the plane had been hijacked.

A Maariv/Teleseker poll:

- "Do you support the disengagement plan?" Yes: 58 percent (among Likud voters: 49 percent; among Likud Central Committee members: 39 percent). No: 29 percent (among Likud voters: 37 percent; among Likud Central Committee members: 53 percent).
- "In the distant future, are you prepared for Palestinian sovereignty in part of the Arab neighborhoods in East Jerusalem?" Yes: 57 percent (among Likud voters: 40 percent; among Likud Central Committee members: 30 percent). No: 39 percent (among Likud voters: 56 percent; among Likud Central Committee members: 68 percent).

Mideast:

Summary:

Senior columnist Nahum Barnea wrote from Washington on page one of mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot: "On Thursday ... America reissued a clean bill of health to the Palestinian Authority."

Washington correspondent Nathan Guttman wrote in left-leaning, independent Ha'aretz: "Bush and his advisers proved on Thursday that there is more than one way to read the letter to Sharon."

Senior op-ed writer Akiva Eldar opined in Ha'aretz: "Abu Mazen can't present his voters with an American undertaking that after democratic elections, a reform of the security mechanisms, the disarming of the militants and a peaceful disengagement, Bush will bare his superpower claws in order to drag Sharon into a final-status agreement."

Block Quotes:

I. "Love Around the Corner"

Senior columnist Nahum Barnea wrote from Washington on page one of mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot (May 27): "On Thursday ... America reissued a clean bill of health to the Palestinian Authority.... It can

be said that the Palestinians gained a few points on Thursday, and Israel lost some. Sharon frequently waves aloft President Bush's commitment to take into consideration the concentrations of Israeli population in the West Bank during negotiations on the final status arrangement. Yesterday, in response to the Palestinians' request, Bush gave a balancing commitment.... These statements weaken Sharon to a certain degree in his debate with the opponents of disengagement.... The religion that currently rules in Washington is democracy. Bush believes that democracy solves everything -- including an existential bloody conflict over 100 years old. If the Palestinian state is democratic, he said yesterday, everything can be solved, including the problem of air space. Anyone who lives in the Middle East knows that this is a simplistic, naive, perhaps even dangerous approach. But anyone who holds a position of leadership in the Middle East knows that lip service must be paid. Abu Mazen contributed his part yesterday to this fairy tale.... The disengagement plan afforded Sharon control over the political agenda. This was its great advantage. But there is no perpetual control in the Middle East. The big brother's eye is watchful, especially since there is a little brother named Abu Mazen, who yesterday officially became a favored son of the administration. Perhaps not as close and important and Sharon, but no less beloved."

II. "Without a Letter, But With a Lot of Good Will"

Washington correspondent Nathan Guttman wrote in left-leaning, independent Ha'aretz (May 27): "Bush's presents to Abu Mazen may not be dramatic, but they definitely evidence good will and a positive attitude toward the Palestinian leader. To a great extent, Abu Mazen will be able to mark the date of the meeting as an event equal in importance to the historic meeting between Bush and Ariel Sharon on April 14, 2004, during which Sharon received the commitment letter. What Abu Mazen got was actually not a letter, but much warmth and many public declarations of support.... President Bush and U.S. diplomacy also scored an achievement. After Sharon was granted a letter of guarantees a year ago, the President was criticized for having given everything already in the first round, and given Sharon so much in exchange of the disengagement -- to the point that it wouldn't be possible to ever reach an accord with the Palestinians based on those understandings.... But Bush and his advisers proved on Thursday that there is more than one way to read the letter to Sharon.... The United States has now leveled the ground, placing on it two relatively contented Middle Eastern players. Each of them has received commitments and understands that they are blurred enough to allow Bush to maneuver between them after the Israeli withdrawal is completed.... For the moment, the administration prefers to deal with 'the day after.'"

III. "Same Words, Different Melody"

Senior op-ed writer Akiva Eldar opined in Ha'aretz (May 27): "In April, Bush said that Abu Mazen had taken a number of steps in the field of security, but that the Palestinian Authority had to do more against terror.... On Thursday, Bush termed Abu Mazen 'a man of peace,' who is acting with determination against terror.... If the disputes with regard to the settlements and Hamas didn't exist, Bush would have to invent them. They provide a pretty wide berth to the president, who is making do with actions that do not deviate from managing the conflict. According to the public statements, in the meeting with Abu Mazen, as in the case of the talks with Sharon, the issues of a timetable, verification mechanisms and enforcement measures were not on the agenda.... And the main issue: Abu Mazen can't present his voters with an American undertaking that after democratic elections, a reform of the security mechanisms, the disarming of the militants and a peaceful disengagement, Bush will bare his superpower claws in order to drag Sharon into a final-status agreement."

KURTZER